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The image displays nine distinct Tibetan Thogchags (talismans) arranged on a yellow background. These objects are typically made of metal and serve as protective or ritualistic items. The designs vary significantly: some feature stupa-like forms with ornate bases, others depict figures or animals, and one prominently displays Tibetan script. The talismans are shown from various angles, highlighting their intricate craftsmanship and symbolic details.

Drawings from Macartney's Embassy to China 1792-1794  
Ming in Busuanga—Shipwreck Ceramics in Northern Palawan  
The Canoe in Traditional Southeast Asia and the Pacific  
Mahabalipuram—the City of the Heroes

# Arts of Asia

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**Cover:** Top right: Rigsum gonpo. The Bodhisattvas Chenresig, Manjushri and Vajrapani, 11th to 13th century. Bottom left: Indigenous Tibetan deity standing astride a horse. Centre and middle right: Frog thogchags. Bottom right: Chenresig and the mani mantra

Selections from the Robert Brundage Collection

Photograph by Don Russel

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# THOGCHAGS

## Talismans of Tibet

JOHN V. BELLEZZA

*THOGCHAGS* ARE Tibetan talismans made of bronze and meteoric metal. They come in a vast array of designs and date from the Bronze Age to the mediaeval period. They are generally small objects ranging in size from one centimetre to eight or more centimetres, and a significant portion of them are thought to have been originally designed as amulets. Through the course of time, many ancient artefacts—bits of military costumes, jewellery, utilitarian objects such as spoons and mirrors, arrowheads, buttons and belt buckles—have come to be considered as thogchags.

What constitutes a thogchag is not always clear in Tibetan culture, however, the fundamental definition is a magical object which is believed to be self-formed and of celestial origins. Primarily thogchags are protective and luck-bestowing devices, that are believed by Tibetans to protect against harm by evil spirits, arrow and bullet strikes, attacks by wild animals, avalanches and a host of other misfortunes. A belief prevalent among the nomads of northern Tibet is that thogchags can prevent a person from being struck by lightning, a palpable danger in the wide open spaces of this part of the country. Moreover, thogchags are thought to attract positive energies which bring about good luck and prosperity and there are legends of people who had either nine or thirteen thogchags synonymous with great power and the fulfilment of all wishes.

There are several myths explaining the origins of thogchags. In one it is said that thogchags dropped from the mouths of sky-dwelling dragons to the earth below. Another Tibetan tale speaks of rival magicians or *ngagpa* attacking each other with hailstones. It is thought that the projected hailstones were magically turned into thogchags as they flew through the air. Yet perhaps the most prevalent myth of origins revolves around a common Tibetan cosmological theme: the fecundating power of lightning. Tibetans believe that at certain times when lightning strikes the ground it generates a spark which reacts with wet earth to produce thogchags.

The thogchag's close personal association combined with their sacred status means that they have been carefully preserved and handed down from generation to generation. Traditionally, they are passed from mother to daughter, father to son, and from religious master to disciple. The specifics of this transmission from one generation to another have not generally been recorded, however, in a few cases, as with a famous line of lamas, thogchags can be traced back ten or more generations. As they are usually kept near a person and have rubbed against skin or clothing for many generations, thogchags often develop a deep, lustrous patina. This patina, which assumes brilliant bronze hues, is among the finest known on metal objects of any kind or provenance. Conversely, some thogchags were buried for long periods of time or otherwise discarded and exhibit various stages and types of bronze disease and verdigris. Some thogchags were made with clips or rings specifically designed so that they could be worn. Over time these wear out and are frequently broken. Sometimes holes form in a thogchag where a string has been attached to it and through many centuries of wear.

Thogchags are often found on the pasturelands by the Tibetan nomads or unearthed by plowmen in the agricultural regions of the country. Their chance discovery by lucky people reinforces their supernatural connotations. The well-known Tibetan master Choegyal Namkhai Norbu relates how he found a damaged thogchag as a youth—finding the lucky object was a good omen, but its damage signified adversity realised sometime later when he had to flee the country.



Photograph courtesy of John V. Bellezza

Tibetan spirit-medium or lhawa displaying a thogchag above his bronze ritual mirror

In Tibetan culture many religious and mystic phenomena are thought to be spontaneously produced and not to be the result of the ordinary laws of cause and effect. This phenomena of self-origination is called *rangjung* and is one of the distinguishing features of thogchags. Thogchags, because of their antiquity, have been divorced from their historical associations to become part of the great Tibetan mythus. While this adds to the mystique of the objects it renders enquiry into their identity very difficult. This is a major factor in why so little Tibetological scholarship has been conducted on the subject.

Thogchags are believed to have come from the heavens and are closely connected with the sky. In the pre-Buddhist Bon religion the sky or celestial realm is the source of the most auspicious and powerful deities. It is from the sky that ancient deities such as Namchi Gunggyal, the mother of the universe, appeared. In the Bon tradition the sky overarches the land and underworld and helps to regulate the chaotic powers contained within them. The awesome power and purity of the sky invests thogchags with great value and religious sentiment. Another allure of thogchags is that even among the relatively common designs there is enough variation to make each piece virtually unique.

Thogchags are often associated with indigenous Tibetan gods. References to thogchags are found in Tibetan texts where they appear as attributes of native deities that are often wrathful in nature, and have the effect of enhancing the power and standing of these deities. For example, in a text of rituals for Bon protector deities, the famous mountain god Nyenchenthanglha is given a thogchag by his grandfather, the ultimate progenitor of the gods, in order to subdue evil beings. Other texts speak of warrior deities having swords and armour made of meteoric metal.

Transliterated from the original Tibetan, thogchag reads: *thog lcags*. This can be literally translated as “thunder iron”, referring to its links with lightning and thunder. However, the preferred etymology is “primordial metal”, underscoring the talisman’s primal origins. In ancient Bon myths of origin, the first gods appeared from the sky which itself arose from a void, therefore thogchags in mythology are related to the beginning of the universe, the appearance of the gods and by extension, to the founding of civilisation.

Complicating enquiry into the historical origins of thogchags is the fact that these talismans do not represent a homogeneous class of objects. In fact, under the label

“thogchag” are objects belonging either directly or through imitation to a gamut of cultures that Tibet had contacts with. The earliest historical links seem to be with Bronze Age Sino-Tibetan cultures and the Central Asian Iron Age Saka-Scythians. A major stumbling block in understanding the early historical context remains the paucity of archaeological data. Since George Roerich discovered arrows and other metallic objects at graves and megaliths in northern Tibet seventy years ago, few advances have been made. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish the Tibetan Bronze Age from the Iron Age prompting some researchers instead to talk about a “Metal Age”.

At present, specialists date the Metal Age in Tibet from the second millennium B.C.E. (before common era) to the sixth century C.E. and the advent of Tibetan Imperial power (in contrast, the Chinese Bronze Age is dated 2200–500 B.C.E.). Metal artefacts which evidently originate in Tibet and have been tentatively dated include a bronze dagger (800–500 B.C.E) and two bronze mirrors (800–300 B.C.E.). Recently, a bronze mirror decorated with a pair of engraved birds found in the Neolithic Chukhong site in the Lhasa Valley has been dated to 1800 B.C.E., and represents the oldest metallic object found to date in Tibet.

The first scholar to systematically study and describe thogchags was G. Tucci, one of the century’s greatest Tibetologists (see his book *Transhimalaya*). He examined the pre-Buddhist genre of thogchags which exhibited designs and motifs related to indigenous religion and not belonging to China or India and inspired by Buddhism. His approach of identifying thogchags alien to Buddhism and ascribing a pre-Buddhist attribution on them remains an important tool of analysis—and will continue to be until more archaeological data is forthcoming. It was George Roerich who first noted similarities between certain Saka-Scythian artefacts and objects from Tibet. He classed these artefacts as belonging to the “Central Asian Animal Style” which features the depiction of animals often with their heads swung back to face their bodies. The carnivores and ungulates represented are cast in a bold and exuberant style, and in many instances form matching pairs. While the earliest thogchags in the Central Asian Animal Style are probably contemporaneous with similar Saka-Scythian artefacts (700 B.C.E.–C.E. 150), this form of design and ornamentation was retained in Tibet. In the north of the country nomads still produce flint pouches and knife sheaths with characteristics of the Central Asian Animal Style.

Besides the Central Asian Animal Style, thogchag objects of actual Central Asian provenance are also found in Tibet. These include Scythian and Ordos bronzes which are considered thogchags by the Tibetans. For example, the Central Asian artefacts shown in this article were obtained in Tibet. Their incorporation into Tibetan cultural beliefs indicates a long-standing association with Tibetans and suggests that intercourse between Tibet and Central Asia goes back to prehistoric times.

Other stylistic affinities of thogchags revolve around the shamanistic cultures of Central and North Asia. For example, the Turko-Mongolian shamans of Siberia wear similar bronze rings and buttons as sacred ornamentation. In Tibetan and shamanistic cultures ancient bronze mirrors (called *melung* and *toli* respectively) are sought-after by spirit-mediums for their thaumaturgic powers.

Certain thogchag designs were influenced by Taoism such as a naked male figure and a kingly figure on horseback. While Shang and Zhou China are best-known for their bronze funerary vessels and ritual war implements, a large body of personal amulets were also produced that are still not well-catalogued. How these might have influenced Tibet is not yet known.

Thogchags from the Buddhist period (post-seventh century) often exhibit Indian influences. These include the ritual thunderbolt (a design which can be traced in Tibet to eighth century Dunhuang manuscripts) and the conjoined sun and moon symbols of tantric Buddhism. Other popular Buddhist motifs include bodhisattvas which were designed to be worn for protective purposes and to distinguish those who belonged to particular tantric cults. Pala and Gupta influences are clearly visible in the early Buddhist thogchags of deities, as well as Central Asian influences from the Khotanese and Sassanid kingdoms.

The historical precedent for thogchags lies in *thogde*, “primordial stones”, a kind of primitive stone amulet. Thogde includes Tibetan Neolithic fetishes and Stone Age tools. Like thogchags, thogde are credited with having been self-formed and have talismanic value. For example, the direct precursor of dart-shaped thogchags are probably dart-shaped Neolithic stone amulets or magical devices. Neolithic arrowheads, spearheads, rings and even Paleolithic choppers are all considered thogde, and are worn or enshrined for their purported supernatural properties. Another kind of thogde are meteorites (also called *serdo* or “hailstones” in Tibetan) which are among the oldest matter in the solar system. It is here that ancient Tibetan myth and modern science converge. Another category of thogde are *do rangjung*: special fossils and sacred stones. Talismanic stones similar to thogde are found in Nepal where they are called *vajradunga*, meaning “thunderbolt stone”.

Among the closest parallels in design and form to thogchags are Tibetan cave paintings dating from the Neolithic through the historic period (post-seventh century). Engraved and painted compositions of animals, birds and anthropomorphs can bear a strong resemblance to thogchags. This affinity is particularly close in the case of native eagle deities of Tibet and primitive stupas. In certain instances, similar motifs were in all likelihood painted and cast in the same time period, explaining parallels in style.

Thogchags are usually worn close to the body as a sacred piece of jewellery in the form of a pendant or ring; or to ornament belts used to carry relic boxes (*gau*), pouches with mantras written inside and ritual implements. Among those who carried thogchags and displayed them during their performances were storytellers (*drungkhen*), professional well-wishers (*drekar*), spirit-mediums (*lhawa*), magicians (*ngagpa*) and certain wandering mystics (*manipa*). Thogchags were attached to magic staffs, drums, mantles, hats, bags, and instruments used in healing rituals. They signified mystic power, gnostic understanding and social prestige.

Thogchags are made of bronze and, to a lesser extent, of meteoric metal. In Tibet bronze is classified according to colour and content: there is red bronze (*li mar*), white bronze (*li kar*), yellow bronze (*li ser*) and bronze of eight metals (*li tra*), among others. The most common alloys are the various types of yellow bronzes. According to Tibetans, thogchags regularly contain traces of gold and silver and other precious metals. The rich colours and lustre of the metals supports such a belief. Meteoric metal is called *namchag* in Tibetan (which literally means “sky metal”) and according to legend, was refined from meteorites. This claim is not easy to substantiate because the collection and smelting of meteorites belongs to an almost forgotten prehistoric tradition of producing metals. The scientific analysis of thogchags and the trace metals they contain may prove an invaluable tool for discerning their age and provenance. To date, no such systematic study has been undertaken.

The introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century initiated the suppression of indigenous Bon culture. This suppression extended to all areas of Tibetan life obscuring, among other things, the identity and function of pre-Buddhist thogchags. As a result, few thogchags from the early period can be conclusively identified. A large variety of thogchags belong to the prehistoric period and include animals, anthropomorphs, geometric designs, ritual mirrors, tubular structures, forked rods, tiny vessels, rings and discs, as well as many others. Most were cast in simple moulds. Their often naturalistic appearance lends credence to the idea that they were self-formed.

What does and does not constitute a thogchag is a debatable subject among Tibetans. The strictest definition states that only objects originally produced as amulets and which were designed to stand alone can genuinely be called thogchags. Nevertheless, in practice many other metallic objects have become subsumed under the label, including ancient utilitarian objects and instruments of war. Even miniature *tsha tsha* moulds (used to make clay figurines), bronze mirrors (especially small ones), and early gau relic/shrine containers are now labelled thogchags. The early Bon and Buddhist gaus (ninth century and earlier) are usually made of bronze and are two to four centimetres across—much smaller than the ones manufactured subsequently. While fragments of early gaus have been discovered on a fairly regular basis, it is very uncommon to find one intact.

A popular design in thogchags is that of the *khyung* or native eagle deity of Tibet which became assimilated into the Indian garuda with the introduction of Buddhism. The horned khyung is closely associated with the mountain spirits of the ancient northern Tibetan kingdom of Shangshung, as well as being an important didactic symbol in both Bon and Buddhism. The khyung is the rival of the water spirits (*lu*) and is one of the few beings that can control them. Khyung thogchags range in age from those that are clearly pre-Buddhist to mediaeval specimens, and pseudo-thogchags commonly produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the syllable *khra* cast into them. The popularity of the deity accounts for its very long life span. Khyungs range in size from one and a half to ten centimetres in height.

Another popular design is the ritual thunderbolt (*dorje*), the quintessential symbol of tantric Buddhism (Vajrayana). This design is especially popular with collectors and students of Buddhism as it is highly prized in the religion. Some dorjes were made flat to wear against the body or to be sewn onto sacred objects. Others are round with each half being composed of four, five, six, eight, nine or more prongs. Another type of ritual thunderbolt is the double dorje (*dorje gyatram*) which is less common than the standard form. Dorje thogchags range in age from the early period of Buddhism in Tibet to the last couple of centuries, and in size from one to ten centimetres in length. Some dorjes were conceivably produced in India or Nepal and imported to Tibet.

Stupas form another common design and consist of either a single stupa or three fused together representing the *rigsum gonpo*, the three most popular bodhisattvas. Buddhist stupas often have a sun and moon finial. In the Bon religion stupas are said to have been used long before the advent of Buddhism in Tibet. Bon stupas frequently have a finial comprising the horns of the khyung flanking a sword (*charu chatri*). Bon thogchag stupas are much less common than the Buddhist counterparts. Like the dorjes and khyungs, stupas vary greatly in size and style. A particularly evocative theme is that of a stupa surmounting a ram's head. From pre-Buddhist times livestock such as sheep and yaks have been essential to the Tibetan way of life, and have played an important role in Bon and other popular religious traditions.

Another standard design is that of spiritual jewels (*norbu*), signifying the basic tenets of the Bon and Buddhist doctrines. The vase (*bumpa*) is also well-represented and likewise, is both a Bon and Buddhist symbol. The vase is used to enshrine the energy of deities and figures in long-life rituals. Thogchag vases come in both two and three-dimensional forms. The conch shell (*dungkar*) is both a Bon and Buddhist auspicious symbol representing the consummation of the means leading to enlightenment. It is found in many forms and sizes. The Bon and Buddhist ritual dart (*phurba*), as well, assumes many styles in thogchags; from very abstract to specimens exhibiting the face of the Phurba deity.

Cruciform shapes, some of which G. Tucci calls Nestorian crosses, are also well-known. It is plausible that during Tibet's Imperial Ascendancy (seventh to ninth centuries) she had contact with Central Asian Christians such as the Nestorians. If so, Tibetans imported the crosses from them or copied their designs. It was during the Imperial period that Tibet came into close contact with a variety of other civilisations including the Arabs, Tang dynasty Chinese, Indian Buddhists, Persians, and the Hellenised satrapies of Bactria and Sogdiana. Such interactions would have been potentially rich sources of thogchags or the inspiration for their manufacture. Indeed, certain thogchags seem to originate outside of Tibet. An example of these is the so-called "Bactrian" lion motif.

Other animals are also represented in thogchag designs. Both standing and crouching lions, symbols of the Tibetan nation, as well as ram, goat and yak heads, the most important animal in Tibet. The earliest Tibetan historical reference to the sacred functions of animals is found in a Bon royal funerary text from Dunhuang, circa the eighth century C.E. Turtles, an important cosmological symbol; scorpions, a Bon and Buddhist protector; and the rare frog also find expression as thogchags. Other animals include antelopes, mounted horses, birds and dragons. It is theorised that certain early zoomorphic thogchags had a totemic function and belonged to specific clans.





## JOHN V. BELLEZZA COLLECTION

### Captions 1–50

1

Left: Tibetan meteorite. Middle: Neolithic talisman or fetish. Right: Neolithic axe head made of gem quality serpentine. Similar in type to specimens found at the Kharou site in eastern Tibet (3000–2000 B.C.E.)

2

Shield-like ornaments used to adorn the costumes of nomadic women. The specimen on the left appears to be topped with fish heads

3

Left: Arrowhead used as talisman. Arrows are also used in long-life rituals, divination and the worship of family protective deities. Middle: Plaque featuring dragons, lions and a khyung. These were used in tormo rituals (sacred cake offerings to deities). Right: Vase (bumpa)

4

Left: Endless knot, one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols. Middle: Ritual mirror designed to be worn by an individual and customarily consecrated to particular protective or tutelary deity. Right: Disc with six spokes. Another type of ritual mirror designed to be worn or used in tormo rituals

5

Conch shells and a scallop shell

6

Left: Pendant, probably at one time mounted

with coral or turquoise. Middle: Ornamental shrine box designed in one piece. Right: Pendant, may have been mounted with coral or turquoise

7

Crouching lions

8

Stupas belonging to the pre-Buddhist period or the early period of Buddhism in Tibet. The rarest in the group is the specimen surmounted by the three crown-like objects representing the Bon charu chatri. The dark-coloured specimen has the sacred syllables Om A Hum moulded on the reverse side

9

Bronze Age ritual mirror (10.5 cms in diameter). This type of mirror was highly valued by oracles and spirit-mediums. In such mirrors it is thought that adepts can see the entire universe. The mirrors are also used to contain the deities of the trance

10

Top left: Originally part of a woman's ornamentation that was hung off her gown. Top centre: Vessel (large ones are put over the thresholds of homes for good luck). Top right: Stirrup. Bottom left: Miniature tsha tsha mould. Bottom centre left: Primitive stupa. Bottom centre right: Vessel. Bottom right: Originally part of a woman's ornamentation



11

Finger rings. The pair of tall protuberances on the one specimen represents early stupas. Each of the stupas are adorned with nine dots, a sacred Bon number

12

Left: Decorative plate probably originally attached to a bag or pouch. Middle: Plate decorated with six wild asses (kyang) in the Central Asian Animal Style, a rare decorative motif (5 cms tall). The kyang is native to the vast plains of northern Tibet. This plate was probably originally sewn on a bag or a pouch. Right: The highly worn holes in this specimen indicate that it was designed to hang as an amulet

13

Circular thogchags. Original function unknown

14

A uniquely designed thogchag features a dragon, conjoined sun and moon, star and flaming jewels

15

Amulets probably originally used as part of a woman's jewellery ensemble. They were designed with clips on the reverse side so that they could either be hung or attached to something

16

Thogchags with geometric designs. The two specimens on the right belong to the Bronze Age steppe cultures

17

Far left and far right: Tubular structures that may have been intended for shamanistic healing rituals as well as being for adornment. Centre left and centre right: Design unidentified. May represent tormas. Manufactured with clips on the reverse side so that they could be worn or attached to something. Attributed to the pre-Buddhist period. Top centre: Arrowhead. Bottom centre: Bead-like object. Like one of the tubular structures it is made of white bronze. Attributed to the pre-Buddhist period

18

Hanging thogchags attributed to the pre-Buddhist period

19

Thogchags of an unknown design. The central extensions of the right and left specimens may represent zoomorphic forms and primitive stupas

20

Flat dorjes of various styles and bronze types (longest 11 cms)

21

Left: Sunburst and early lotus design of thirteen points indicating a Bon origin. Centre left: Conjoined sun and moon. Centre right: Double ring design. Right: Design unidentified

22

Left: Dorje finger ring. This specimen was owned by a lineage of Bonpo treasure hunters from eastern Tibet. Its ownership can be traced back several centuries. It was generously gifted to the author by His Holiness Menri Khenpo, the distinguished head of the Bon religion. Middle: Ring with two dorjes. Original function unknown. Right: Dorje finger ring

23

Various examples of round dorje thogchags

24

Various examples of round dorje thogchags. The longest specimen contains an iron axis alloyed with meteoric metal

25

Centre: Double dorjes attributed to the early Tibetan Buddhist period. Specimen on top is made of red bronze. Right and left: Dorjes with circular extensions representing sacred energy fields

26

Turtle, scorpion, beetle and early bird thogchags

27

Various khyung thogchags attributed to the pre-Buddhist or early Tibetan Buddhist period

28

Various khyung thogchags. The largest specimen boasts a khyung surmounting an eagle or vulture

29

An assortment of bronze spoons. The three smallest ones were used for medicines

30

An assortment of bronze spoons. The centre right specimen is clearly pre-Buddhist. A similar style spoon with anthropomorphic heads exists

31

Thogchag featuring a horse in the Central Asian Animal Style embellished with the solar

and lunar discs. This thogchag was originally part of a military uniform. Attributed to the Tibetan Imperial or pre-Imperial period

32

Disc embellished with eight counter-clockwise swastikas each contained within lotus petals. The left-facing swastikas clearly identify the thogchag as belonging to the Bon religion, however, the eight-petal lotus array indicates that it was produced after the indigenous religion came into contact with Buddhism

33

Flower thogchags. Left: The nine petals of this specimen indicate a Bon association

34

"Nestorian" crosses

35

Ritual darts (phurba)

36

Various lion figures. Bottom right: "Bactrian" lion motif

37

Top left: The Bodhisattva Vajrapani. Attributed to the early Buddhist period. Top right: Vajrapani. Bottom left: Vajrapani. Bottom right: The Bodhisattva Chenresig

38

Buckles for scripture covers. The largest specimen features two lions in the Central Asian Animal Style flanking a tsepu, a protective deity. The ends of the buckle terminate in dorjes (7th to 9th century)

39

Left: Horseman; probably represents an indigenous deity or the Tibetan epic hero Ling Gesar. Right: Horse with parasol

40

Bon stupa and long-life deity (12th century or earlier)

41

Left: Pair of unidentified animals. Centre: Pair of horses in the Central Asian Animal Style. Right: Horseman, may represent the Tibetan epic hero Ling Gesar

42

Left: Ram head surmounted by a stupa. Centre left: Yak head. Centre right: Ram head. Right: Ram head surmounted by a Bon stupa

43

Flaming jewel thogchags (norbu mebar). Some of these were originally diadems on the crowns of large statues which came to be used as amulets

44

An assortment of early period shrine boxes

45

An assortment of early period shrine boxes

46

Thogchag circlets

47

Vases

48

Naked male figure, thought to be Chinese or Chinese influenced

49

Thogchags of unidentified designs

50

Bronze calendar wheel. While this object is not strictly a thogchag it is made of a similar type of bronze (16th or 17th century)



Photograph courtesy of John V. Bellezza

Man wearing a khyung thogchag



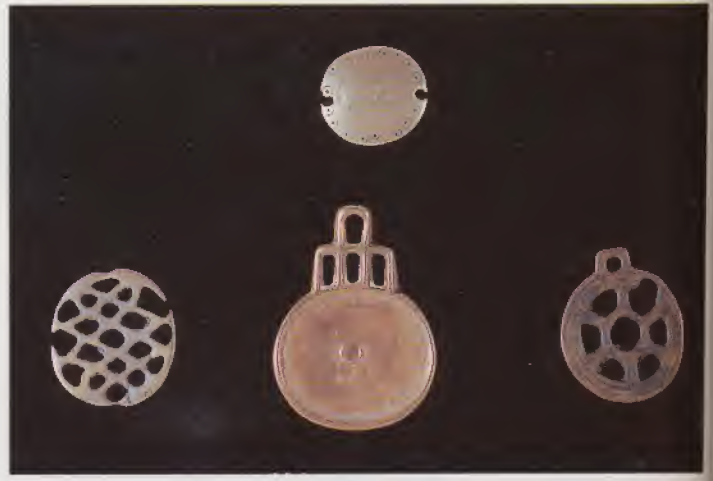
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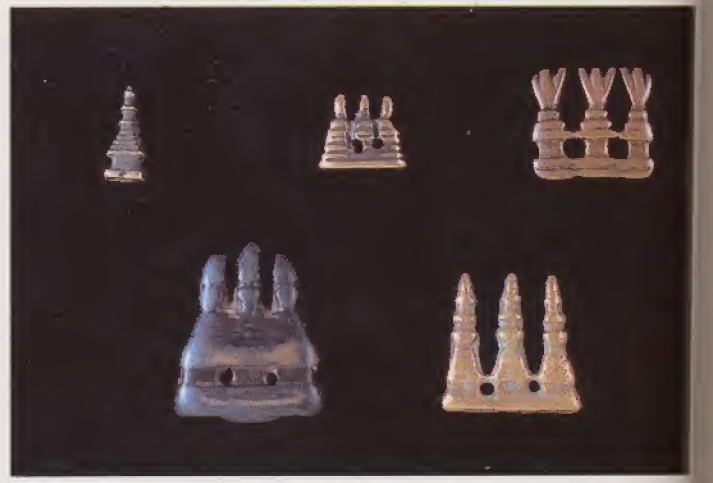
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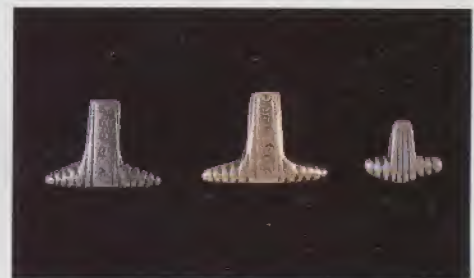
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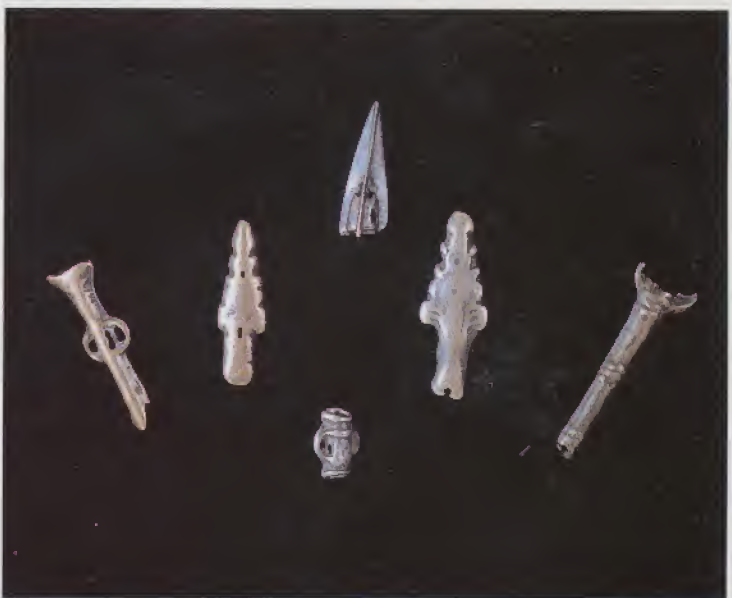
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